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A Study of Combat Reliefs of Commanders of  
Battalions and Lower Units During the  
Vietnam Era.

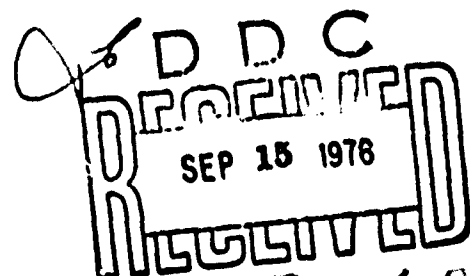
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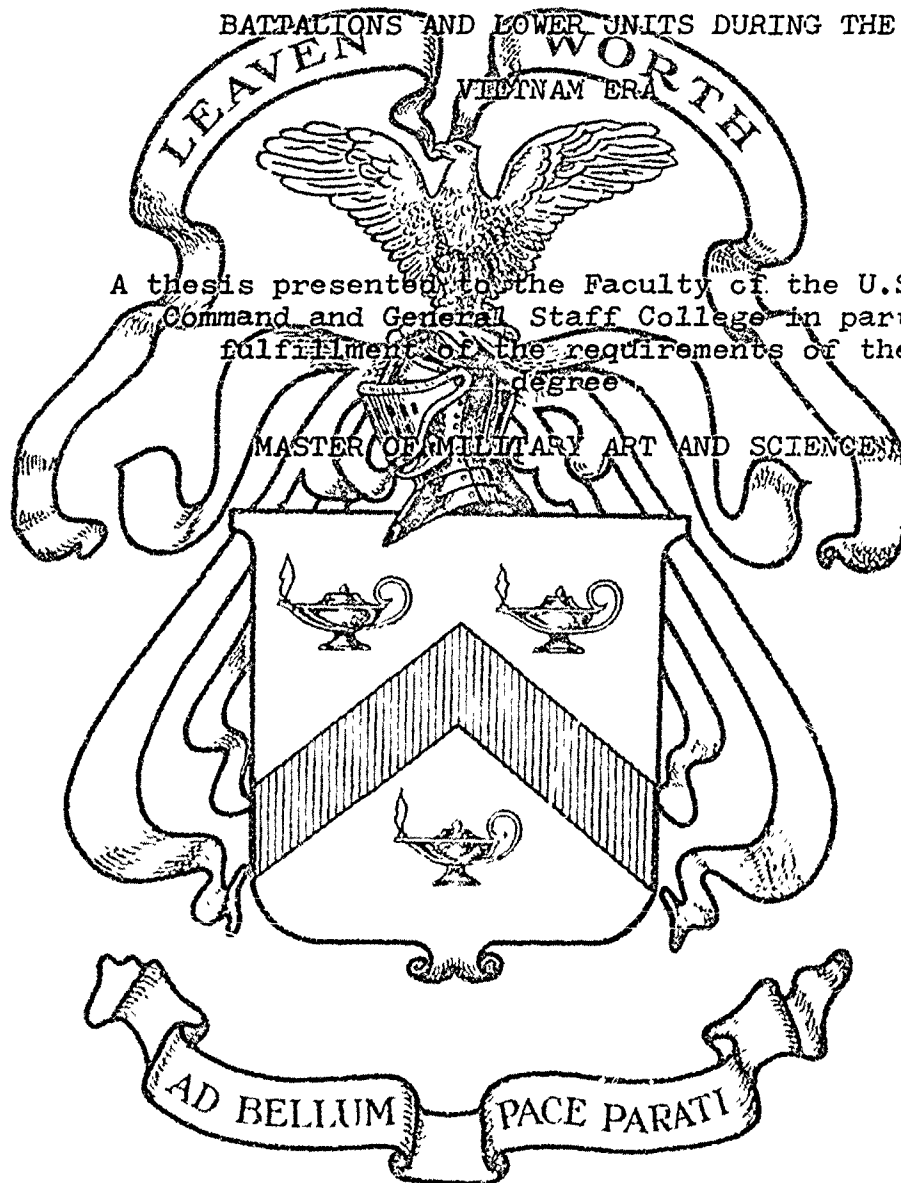
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Further examination of the causes and effects of reliefs produced guidelines for commanders to consider before relieving a subordinate commander.



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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

THOMAS V. DRAUDE, MAJ, USMC  
B.S., United States Naval Academy, 1962

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas  
1976

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

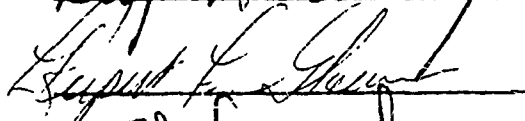
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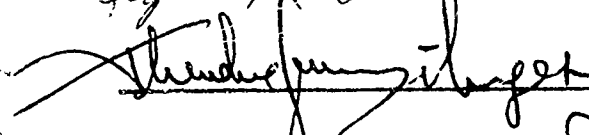
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When Should A Commander Be Relieved? A Study of Combat Reliefs  
of Commanders of Battalions and Lower Units During the Vietnam Era

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual student author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency.

## ABSTRACT

This study attempts to determine when commanders of battalions and lower units should be relieved during combat. The investigation analyzed actual reliefs during the Vietnam era to determine why the commanders were relieved, the availability of replacements, the role of counselling, and the effect on the unit.

Investigation reveals that most reliefs were not caused by a single deficiency but rather by a combination of perceived shortcomings. Mission failure was not a significant reason for relief. Captains and lieutenants were more likely to be relieved than were lieutenant colonels. Replacements for the relieved commanders were usually available. Most reliefs were effected without prior counselling. The effect of the relief on the unit depended primarily on the unit's evaluation of the relieved commander's leadership and popularity.

Further examination of the causes and effects of reliefs produced guidelines for commanders to consider before relieving a subordinate commander.

## DEDICATION

In them were displayed nobility, frailty, resolution, loyalty, indecision, vanity, fear, simplicity, selfishness, greatness and littleness--all the threads which make up the human fabric.<sup>1</sup>

This description of the Desert Generals also applies to our commanders in Vietnam. They all commanded for different motives, in different manners, and under different pressures. Some viewed command as a necessary evil in the climb to success. Others were like Lord Moran's battalion commander who--

. . . has gone to war in the faith that there is no other way open to those to whom freedom of the mind is life itself. There he must remain. The rights of the individual have gone, he belongs to his men. He has accepted war, he must allow no mood, think nothing, do nothing, that may weaken his own purpose or the purpose of his fellows.<sup>2</sup>

It is to the commanders and their men that this thesis is dedicated. Some were successful, some were relieved justly or unjustly, and some continued past the point at which they should have been relieved. All of them are different as a result of their experiences. All of them know the burden of making decisions which cost the lives of their men.

---

<sup>1</sup>Correlli Barnett, The Desert Generals (New York: Ballentine Books, 1960), Introduction.

<sup>2</sup>Lord Charles Moran, The Anatomy of Courage (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), p. 41.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION . . . . .	ii
LIST OF FIGURES . . . . .	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
II. THE PROBLEM . . . . .	5
BACKGROUND . . . . .	5
IMPORTANCE . . . . .	6
ASSUMPTIONS . . . . .	8
HYPOTHESIS . . . . .	8
DEFINITIONS . . . . .	9
FOCUS . . . . .	10
OUTLINE OF THE THESIS . . . . .	11
III. METHODOLOGY . . . . .	12
SOURCES . . . . .	12
PILOT STUDIES . . . . .	12
SAMPLING PROCEDURES . . . . .	13
QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN . . . . .	14
INTERVIEW . . . . .	16
LIMITATION . . . . .	17
IV. FINDINGS AND CASE STUDIES . . . . .	18
RESPONSE . . . . .	18
DEFINITIONS . . . . .	19

	Page
MOST SIGNIFICANT REASONS FOR RELIEF . . . .	20
SUBCATEGORIES OF "OTHER" . . . . .	21
COMPOSITE REASONS FOR RELIEF . . . . .	22
SUBCATEGORIES OF RELIEFS . . . . .	27
TRENDS . . . . .	30
RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS WITH NON-STUDENTS . .	33
CASE STUDY #1 . . . . .	39
TACTICAL ERROR . . . . .	39
CASE STUDY #2 . . . . .	41
TACTICAL ERROR . . . . .	41
CASE STUDY #3 . . . . .	42
PERSONAL CONDUCT . . . . .	42
CASE STUDY #4 . . . . .	43
PERSONAL CONDUCT . . . . .	43
CASE STUDY #5 . . . . .	44
COWARDICE . . . . .	44
CASE STUDY #6 . . . . .	45
EMOTIONAL RESPONSE . . . . .	45
CASE STUDY #7 . . . . .	46
BAD PRESS . . . . .	46
CASE STUDY #8 . . . . .	48
TACTICAL ERROR . . . . .	48
CASE STUDY #9 . . . . .	49
TACTICAL ERROR . . . . .	49

	Page
CASE STUDY #10 . . . . .	50
TACTICAL ERROR . . . . .	50
CASE STUDY #11 . . . . .	52
INABILITY TO CONTROL UNIT . . . . .	52
CASE STUDY #12 . . . . .	54
INABILITY TO CONTROL UNIT . . . . .	54
CASE STUDY #13 . . . . .	55
INABILITY TO CONTROL UNIT . . . . .	55
CASE STUDY #14 . . . . .	56
SUMMARY RELIEF . . . . .	56
CASE STUDY #15 . . . . .	58
FAILURE TO COMPLY WITH SENIOR'S GOALS . . . . .	58
CASE STUDY #16 . . . . .	59
MISPLACED PRIORITIES . . . . .	59
CASE STUDY #17 . . . . .	61
BAD LUCK . . . . .	61
ENDNOTES . . . . .	63
V. CONCLUSIONS, OBSERVATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS . . . . .	65
SUMMARY . . . . .	65
CONCLUSIONS . . . . .	68
OBSERVATIONS . . . . .	69
RECOMMENDATIONS . . . . .	74
ENDNOTES . . . . .	75
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	76

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figures	Page
CHAPTER I	
1. Questionnaire . . . . .	15
CHAPTER IV	
1. Most Significant Reason by Category . . . . .	21
2. Subcategories of "Other" . . . . .	23
3. Total Numbers Assigned to Each Category . . . . .	26
4. Subcategories of Reliefs . . . . .	28

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

When should a commander be relieved? This question is one that arises in the study of military history or in the course of many professional officers' careers. Some specific examples of the relief of senior commanders are available, but the lower level reliefs are often treated as "military gossip"--the facts are not clear, the information is at best second-hand, and it happened to someone else, justly or unjustly.

My interest in this subject began as a platoon commander in 1963. As our battalion joined the Third Marine Division in anticipation of future deployment in Vietnam, I wondered how my platoon and I would perform in combat. If we performed poorly, that is, did not accomplish the assigned mission, then I would unquestionably and rightfully be relieved. But in 1966, as a company commander, I perceived that relief was not being used as the solution for the problem of mission failure. Three occasions arose where I was nearly relieved. One was over a mission failure. The second was a personality conflict with my Battalion Commander (in which the Assistant Division Commander intervened) and the third was a disagreement in tactics with the III MAF Commander (in which my new Battalion Commander intervened). On each occasion, it was a judgment call on the part of my seniors which saved me. Many of my

peers and some seniors were not as fortunate.

The attitude of "relief is the solution to any problem" seemed to infect many of my peers in the Marine Corps. During a class on Battalion Tactics at the Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School in 1968, a scenario was depicted in which one of the rifle companies was late in crossing the line of departure and in securing its objective. When the instructor asked us our reaction to this situation, many captains automatically said, "Relieve the Company Commander!" Perhaps, in an actual situation their response would have been different, but at the time they reflected what they had seen (or experienced) in Vietnam.

My interest in and frustration with this problem continued through my last assignment. As a Marine Security Guard Company Commander, I commanded thirty-five detachments throughout Europe, each led by a Staff Non-Commissioned-Officer (E-6 through E-9). These Non-Commissioned-Officers-in-Charge (NCOIC's) worked for the State Department in providing, through their detachments of five to thirty Marines, protection for classified material, U.S. property, and security for the U.S. personnel at their respective posts. Each NCOIC had been thoroughly screened before attending a rigorous six week course with a fifty percent attrition rate. Despite the thorough screening, training, and testing process, I relieved eight of them in my two years of command. Though not under combat conditions, these reliefs were traumatic for the Marines affected and the results of agonizing decisions for me--agonizing

because mine were totally matters of judgment, without established guidelines. I do not regret my decisions. I do regret that many commanders must make such decisions based totally on their own judgment and, perhaps, without considering the effects on the mission, the unit, and the individual.

This thesis is an attempt to answer the question of when to relieve a commander. It has provided me with the guidelines I must consider when I am faced with this problem again.

At one time when Army Chief of Staff, General Creighton Abrams was introduced to a group of Army officers, he startled them by stating that there was no such person as General Abrams. He explained that although there had once been a Second Lieutenant Abrams, the man standing in front of them was actually a combination of all of the senior officers who influenced him throughout his career. He assumed responsibility for what had developed, but he was not the real contributor to the end product.

This thesis is much like General Abrams' example. I bear full responsibility for it, but the real contribution came from others.

First, the response from my fellow-students in Division A in completing and returning questionnaires and in granting interviews was most gratifying. The best example of this was a note from one student whom I had not yet met. "Sorry I can't help you--I've had no such experience (in the combat relief of a commander). However, if I can help you in any way on this study, please let me know."

Next, the other officers on post were totally supportive. No officer, from major general to captain, was too busy to see me.

In the interviews with students and post personnel, the Army officers were as frank as my fellow Marines in sharing with me their personal and professional embarrassment over the incidents they related. In some cases the narration of these incidents was obviously painful to the officer involved, whether he did the relieving or was himself relieved. In other cases, the participation in the relief of another officer had left an adverse effect on the narrator or on his record, yet his answers were clear and straightforward.

The members of my MMAS committee, Colonel Glover, Colonel Suranyi-Unger, and Lieutenant Colonel Abramowitz provided encouragement as well as guidance throughout the project. Their enthusiasm and expertise maintained my momentum at critical points in the year.

Finally, my wife who suffered through my self-doubts, moods of depression, and bursts of impatience through every assignment and duty station, deserves special thanks. Besides enduring the above, she also typed and edited my thesis drafts.

To all of these fine people, I am grateful.



## CHAPTER II

### THE PROBLEM

#### BACKGROUND

In the evolution of warfare the implements of violence have changed significantly. From Cain's bludgeon to today's variety of nuclear and laser weapons, the means of destruction appear to be limited only by imagination and the current technological sophistication. The manager of violence, man, still remains the decisionmaker. The history of warfare often shows that the men who made more correct decisions were usually the victors. The evolution of warfare brought with it the requirement for an increasing number of decisionmakers. The greater sophistication of weapons and numbers of combatants using these increasingly lethal weapons required more controllers to decide when, where, and how the implements of violence and their managers would be employed.

With this increase in men and weapons came systems for their control. Chains of command were established to ensure the proper employment of a commander's assets. The links in the chain, the intermediate commanders, achieved greater importance as the complexities of combat grew, and the requirement for decisions at the intermediate level became more apparent.

The importance of combat commanders is well documented. The fact that the call to arms is recognized by many as a profession supports the justification for training, testing, and selecting the best professionals for positions of command. Their decisions in combat affect not only the men they command but also the security of the nation or cause for which they fight.

Although much is written, taught, and practiced in the training and testing of commanders, there is a scarcity of information on their actual selection. Specifically, there is almost nothing written on the "selecting out" or relief of combat commanders at the critical level of battalion or below. The decision of a higher commander to retain or reject his leaders at the fighting level is left to the higher commander's personal judgment. In this case, his judgment is not a matter of interpreting standard orders, guidelines, or principles as there are virtually none.

#### IMPORTANCE

The reasons for relief and the attendant effects on involved personnel needs to be examined. Only by analyzing these reasons and effects can "good" reliefs be used as a general standard for future decisions. The documentation to provide data for such a study does not exist to the knowledge of this writer, but conversations with commanders and with students, staff, and faculty at the Command and General Staff College support this requirement of relief analysis.

There is much information concerning the reliefs of higher commanders. President Truman's relief of General MacArthur, Eisenhower's actions with Patton, General H. M. Smith's (USMC) relief of General Ralph Smith (USA) are all illustrations of how this problem was dealt with on a high command level, but almost no informative guidelines exist for relief of commanders at a lower strata. Elements of the required information on reliefs at battalion and below (the "What, Why and When") are contained in the relieved officer's Army Officer Efficiency Report (OER), or its equivalent form for other branches of service. This information from official personnel records is available only to the rated officer.

Because of this difficulty, I believe the study is of value to combat commanders of all services. The purpose of the study is to provide guidelines to commanders for the relief of battalion commanders and below during combat conditions. I intend to do this by examining the causes and effects of selected reliefs. The questions to be answered by this study are:

- a. Why are commanders of battalion or lower units relieved?
- b. Was a replacement for the relieved commander readily available?
- c. What were the effects of the relief on the unit concerned and its ability to accomplish the mission?
- d. When should commanders of battalion or lower units be relieved?

The method for gathering data in order to conduct this study was by questionnaire. My sample included one division of students from the 1975-1976 Command and General Staff College, all of the colonel's on post at Fort Leavenworth, three general officers on post, and five retired general officers (three Army, two Marine Corps). The questionnaire was returned by officers who had been relieved; had relieved a subordinate commander; had knowledge concerning a relief; or had no knowledge of such reliefs under combat conditions.

#### ASSUMPTIONS

My assumption is that the officers questioned answered honestly. The responses of officers who had been relieved or were not directly involved in a relief may be considered more subjective. Human beings react in accord with their perceptions of facts. These officers reflected their own perceptions which affected them at the time of their reliefs and will continue to affect them regardless of the intentions of the relieving commander. Were it possible to have only cold, objective facts concerning the reliefs, I do not believe the study would be as valid. Battlefield decisions, including reliefs of commanders, are not made in a sterile environment.

#### HYPOTHESIS

My hypothesis for this study is that battalion commanders and below are relieved in combat because they failed

to accomplish the mission. By proving this hypothesis, I establish that reliefs are "mission oriented" rather than actions based upon personality conflicts, leadership idiosyncracies, or other "non-mission oriented" reasons.

#### DEFINITIONS

Several terms in this study require definition. By "relief," I mean the removal for cause of a commander from his unit. This eliminates the reliefs effected by physical disability, reassignment, or end of tour. The assignment policy of "six months on a staff and six months in command" was often used by both the Army and the Marine Corps in Vietnam. It is accepted that adjustments in this policy could be interpreted as reliefs in the pejorative sense, but they were not considered in this study. I make this restriction in order to limit the study to those cases in which the unit as well as its commander were aware that a relief for cause had been effected. It is obvious that the term "relief" would be used so frequently in this study as to make it monotonous. The use of synonyms such as "removal," "fire," or "dismiss," are to make the study more readable.

The term "battalion and below" includes comparable sized units such as squadrons, troops, and batteries under the command of officers. The reliefs of Staff-Non-Commissioned-Officers (SNCOs) or Non-Commissioned-Officers (NCOs) were not included in this study.

By "combat" is meant conditions in which U.S. Armed Forces were engaged in hostilities with a foreign enemy or experienced the possibility of such an engagement. This has allowed the study to include World War II, the Korean Conflict and operations in Vietnam and Korea's DMZ.

#### FOCUS

The focus of this study was narrowed to battalion and below for two reasons: (1) the lack of published data at this level; and (2) the fact that more officers have had or will have combat command experience of lower units. There are and will be more officers controlling lieutenant colonels, captains, and lieutenants, than will control generals and colonels.

The focus has been further narrowed to the combat environment because it is the most professionally demanding one. Command in peacetime should be a joy. Command in combat is an honor. Future combat commanders should be more aware of the causes and the effects of relief. We cannot afford to adopt the attitude that simply relieving commanders is the solution to all problems. Finally, it is hoped that this study will lead to more empirical studies for the benefit of future combat commanders.

The decision to relieve a commander will continue to be a matter of judgment. The intent of this study is to neither weaken any commander's authority or responsibility nor

to establish a weighted-value checklist as a substitute for a commander's judgment. It is intended to provide a study to examine an area of practical value to future combat commanders.

#### OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

The other chapters in this thesis are structured as follows:

- a. Chapter III describes the method used in the study.
- b. Chapter IV includes the findings and case studies.
- c. Chapter V lists the conclusions, observations, and recommendations.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The difficulties in acquiring data, published or in official records, are addressed in Chapter II.

### SOURCES

Another source was the officer population at Fort Leavenworth. A division of the Command and General Staff College Class of 1975-76 was chosen as my sample. This choice provided primary and secondary source material. Additional information to amplify student sources was acquired from the general officers and colonels mentioned in Chapter II.

In order to determine the sources of information, a questionnaire was sent to officers in the control group. The returned questionnaire indicated which officers were subjects for the detailed interview. Every officer indicating on the questionnaire a willingness to discuss the matter was interviewed, and the conversation was taped.

### PILOT STUDIES

There are two pilot studies in this area. The first, the U.S. Army War College Study on Military Professionalism, was directed by the Army Chief of Staff and was intended to portray the prevailing climate of professionalism within the Officer Corps. The foundation of this study was the selected officers' perceptions of the existing climate of the Officer Corps. The



method used was by questionnaire and personal interview. The study points out that many lieutenant colonels and below were relieved in Vietnam for insufficient reasons.

The second study, the Survey of Officer Professionalism-Generalization-Specialization, is a survey of general officers, forty-eight of whom had experienced command in Vietnam. These general officers were asked to rate their subordinate field grade commanders. Only 54 percent of the commanders were rated outstanding. Another 34 percent were rated satisfactory, and 12 percent unsatisfactory. Some qualifying comments indicated that some commanders, removed after very short tenures, were not included in the ratings. Various causes for failure were listed, but no specific examples were given.

#### SAMPLING PROCEDURES

I chose Division A, consisting of 280 students, for my sample. This division was one-fourth of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College class and was composed of five sections (including my own) of fifty-six students each.

In choosing one division, I contacted one out of every four students. The system of assigning students to their divisions and sections is detailed and meticulous. It ensures equal distribution of students based upon rank, branch, component, sex and specialty. In this sense, one Command and General Staff College division may be considered a random group of officers from the student body. The Allied and Sister Services officers are assigned by generally the same policy.

Students from every branch represented at the College, except Medical and Nurse Corps, were in the division sampled.

I chose my own division for a variety of reasons. I was able to introduce myself and explain the purpose of my study and questionnaire to the assembled sections during a class presented to the division. Only one of the five sections did not have a Navy or Marine student to assist me in distributing and collecting the questionnaires. The five sections are usually located close to each other, and this eased the problem of returning the questionnaires to me.

I also surveyed all general officers and all colonels on post. I desired to take advantage of the experience available from these officers, especially as it pertained to the higher level perceptions of reliefs during the Vietnam era.

#### QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The questionnaire (Figure 1) was designed to provide a qualitative and quantitative basis for my study. The reasons for relief were based on those stated in Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-15; Leadership at Senior Levels of Command to be most important. I deleted "poor health" as a reason in order to eliminate the non-pejorative cause. I deleted "loss of confidence in the subordinate commander" because I did not believe it was specific enough and would not aid in providing substantive data. I added "failure to accomplish the mission" in accordance with my hypothesis and "other" to

## FIGURE 1

Dear Sir:

I'm enrolled in the MMAS program at CGSC. My thesis is on the relief of commanders of battalions and below under combat conditions. My hypothesis: "Commanders Are Relieved Because they Failed to Accomplish the Mission". My goal is to provide future commanders with some guidelines to consider before relieving a subordinate commander. May I have a few minutes of your time and experience?

If you have had experience in the combat relief of a commander of a battalion or lower unit (relieved a commander or are familiar with such a relief), please assign a number from 100 (most significant reason) to 1 (least significant reason) to each of the following:

- ☐ Failure to accomplish the mission
- ☐ Indecision
- ☐ Poor judgement
- ☐ Loss of control of his command (allowed XO and/or staff to command)
- ☐ Failure to cooperate with superior and associates
- ☐ Personal conflict with superior officers
- ☐ Other (please explain briefly)

Place where relief took place

Vietnam

Korea

Was a replacement for the relieved commander readily available (e.g., the XO was a suitable replacement or another available officer was considered capable)? Circle Yes or No

Yes

No

Would you be willing to discuss your experience further at a time convenient to you?

Y.

No

Name

SECTION/OFFICE/ACTIVITY

allow the recipient to explain any other causes.

The place of the relief allowed me to compare removals from command in Korea (DMZ duty) with Vietnam.

#### INTERVIEW

A subsequent taped interview was conducted with each officer who expressed a willingness to discuss his experience.

This interview consisted of a narration of the events leading to the relief and the relationship of the narrator to the commander removed. Names and units were omitted. A verification of the numbers assigned to the various causes was made. The availability of a replacement was discussed, including any delay in his arrival and the unit's mission at the time of the relief. I asked if the relieved commander was counselled by a senior on the observed deficiency (if applicable) at any time prior to the relief. My last question pertained to the effect of the relief on the unit and its ability to accomplish the mission.

My data collection could not begin until the interview was completed. I could not justify using data which had not been verified. In those cases in which the officer did not desire to be interviewed, I did not include his written responses in my findings.

Any confusion caused by the questionnaire was cleared up in the interview, the key to the data acquisition. In some cases the numbers assigned by the interviewee did not coincide

with his narration of the relief. In other cases the officer was assigning numbers based on more than one relief incident. These errors were corrected at the time of the interview.

I had two methodological assumptions:

- a. That the most significant reason for relief was assigned the highest number.
- b. That other reasons bearing on the relief were assigned a proportionate number.

#### LIMITATION

The limitation of a subjective evaluation is discussed in Chapter II. The other limitation to this study is the reliance on memory. This limitation did not seem to be a significant one. The events were so clear in the minds of most officers that they were able to give fairly complete details and to answer questions without long pauses or qualifying statements about their memories.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS AND CASE STUDIES

#### RESPONSE

Of the two hundred and eighty questionnaires distributed to Division A, ninety-six were returned. Forty of the students responding stated that they had no experience with combat reliefs. Of the remaining fifty-six students who filled out the questionnaire, three indicated that they would not desire to discuss their experience further.

Sections three, four, and five had a considerably high response rate. Forty-eight percent of my section (four) responded, and it had the highest number of completed questionnaires (questionnaires with one or more reported reliefs). Sections three and five had responses of 46 percent and 37.5 percent, and a correspondingly high number of completed questionnaires. These three sections, with an average response rate of nearly 44 percent, were selected for my interviews. This selection allowed me to interview thirty-eight students (representing 22.6 percent of the three sections) who responded, completed the questionnaire, and indicated a willingness to discuss their experiences. Seventeen of them had experiences with more than one relief, so my data base expanded to fifty-nine incidents.

## DEFINITIONS

The categories listed in the questionnaire were taken from DA Pamphlet 600-15, Leadership at Senior Levels of Command. As stated in Chapter III, these categories were modified for this study.

In order to determine into which category a specific relief fell the following definitions were used:

Failure to accomplish the mission. The inability of the unit to carry out its assigned tactical or operational tasks. These tasks would vary from advisory (in the Special Forces context) to supply and services (for combat service support units). In order to qualify for this category an affirmative reply would answer the question "Did the unit do what it was required to do in response to a specific order or in its inherent mission statement?".

Indecision. The commander's failure to make a choice of what to do. Unlike "poor judgment" in which the commander's decision was perceived as being faulty, "Indecision" was reserved for the hesitation or total paralysis which prevented the commander to make any decision which would have affected the unit at a critical time and place.

Poor judgment. Reserved for the operational or tactical environment this category was applied to the commander's decisions concerning his unit. Negligence and failure to correct deficiencies which did not result in mission failure are suitable examples. Conversely, decisions which affected

only the commander (lying, personal conflict with seniors, and personal conduct) would not be included.

Loss of control of his command. The situation in which the commander is the titular head of his unit but not its real commander. This would include cases in which the mission was accomplished in spite of rather than because of the unit's commanding officer, usually a weak, ineffectual officer.

Failure to cooperate with superior and associates. The commander who cannot or will not get along with anyone. Unlike "personality conflict with superior officers" which applies to the commander-to-commander relationship, this category is reserved for those commanders who are deemed antagonistic and disruptive to all of the next higher command.

Personal conflict with superior officers. The breakdown in the commander-to-commander relationship. This is usually caused by differences in personalities, philosophies or goals which the senior officer perceives as intolerable.

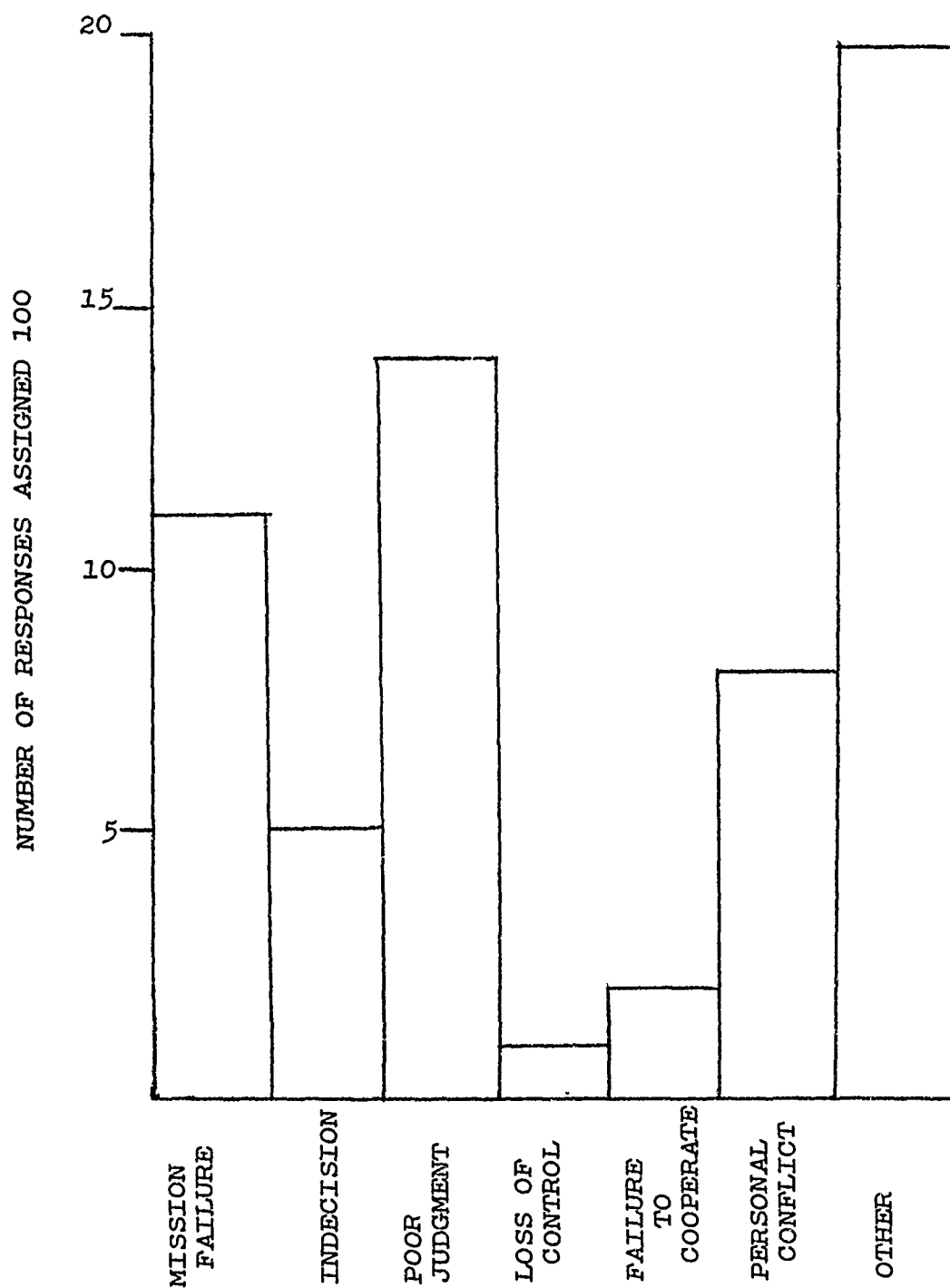
Other. The category reserved for cases not listed. This would include such incidents as personal conduct, cowardice, and requesting one's own relief.

#### MOST SIGNIFICANT REASONS FOR RELIEF

As described in Chapter III, the reasons for relief were verified during the interviews. The cases were then separated, by category, based upon the most significant reason for relief. Figure 1 illustrates this initial separation.



FIGURE 1  
MOST SIGNIFICANT REASON BY CATEGORY



According to this figure, the reasons, by percentage, for each category are: (1) Mission failure-18.6%; (2) Indecision-8.4%; (3) Poor judgment-23.7%; (4) Loss of control-1.8%; (5) Failure to cooperate-1.8%; (6) Personal conflict-13.5%; and (7) Other-32.2%.

#### SUBCATEGORIES OF "OTHER"

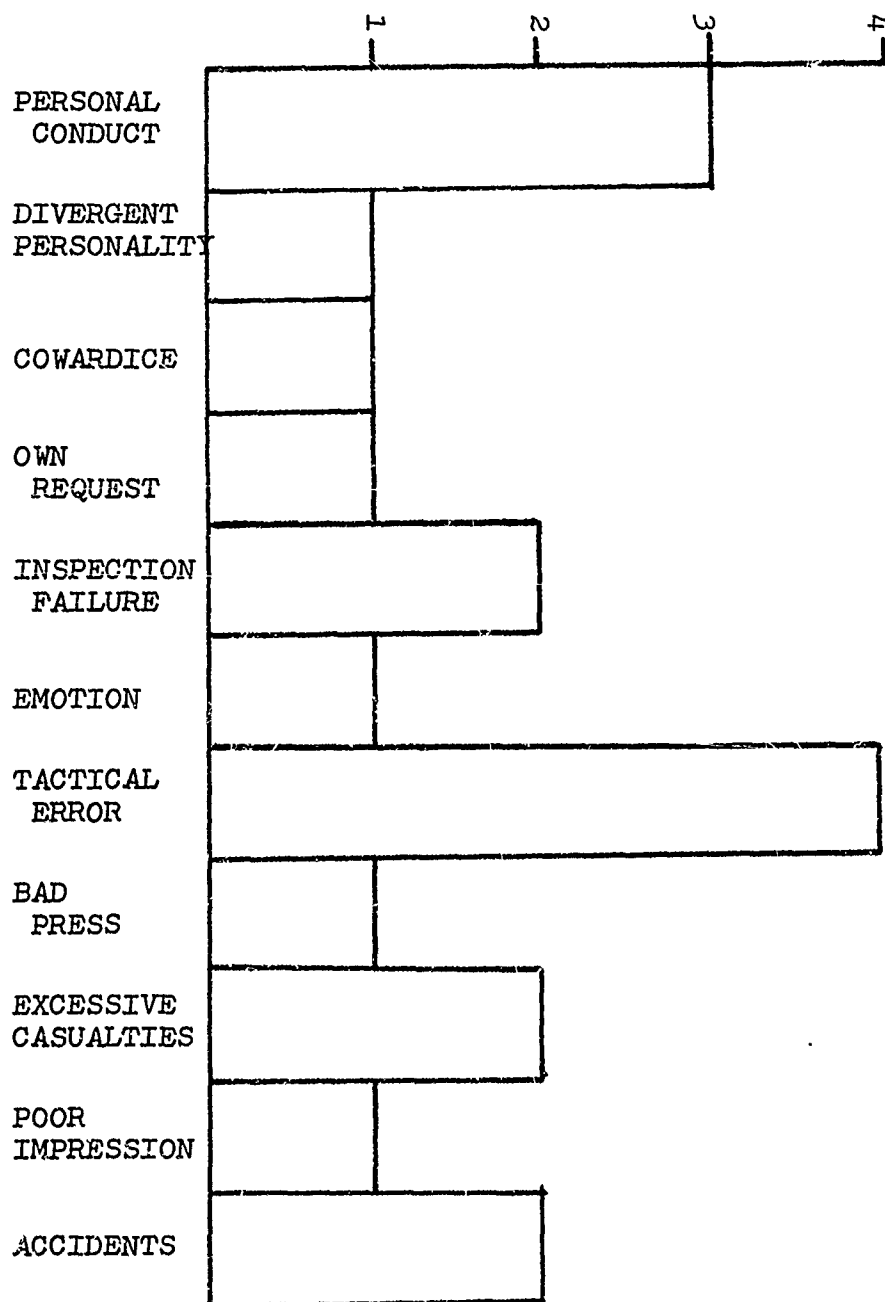
The category of "other" received nineteen of the fifty-nine responses. Bearing in mind that this category was reserved for only those reasons not covered in the other categories, it was necessary to analyze each of these cases in order to determine why nearly one-third of the reported reliefs took place. Figure 2 depicts this analysis.

The four cases of "tactical error" involved artillery units firing in support of United States or Allied infantry forces. Although in each case the artillery units error did not result in mission failure, the commander of the battery (three cases) or battalion (one case) was relieved.

"Personal conduct" dealt with three reported cases in which the relieved commander's personal actions, as viewed by his senior, were more reprehensible than his professional actions.

There were two cases each of "inspection failure," "excessive casualties," and "accidents." The inspections were conducted by the Inspector General and were announced. These were not cases of "surprise" or "no-notice" inspections held by senior commanders. The "excessive casualties"

NUMBER OF CASES ASSIGNED 100

FIGURE 2  
SUBCATEGORIES OF "OTHER"

reliefs were incidents in which the senior commander determined that the casualty ratio of enemy to friendly was unsatisfactory in the mission accomplishment. The relieved commander didn't necessarily do anything wrong, he simply lost too many men. The "accidents" were those types in which the relieved commander was not deemed negligent. His error was in being in command at the time the accidents took place. One incident was the accidental discharge of a rifle in Korea. The other was an airplane accident in Vietnam.

The single cases of "divergent personality" (no conflict involved, just too different in the perception of the senior) through "poor impression" (made on the senior by a new junior commander) point out various other rare reasons for relief.

#### COMPOSITE REASONS FOR RELIEF

After separating the cases into the appropriate categories (Figure 1) and subcategories of "Other" (Figure 2) I desired to display a composite picture (total of all numbers assigned, by category) of all reported reliefs. My reason for doing so was that in forty-two of the fifty-nine cases the relief was caused by more than just one of the reasons listed on the questionnaire. For example, a questionnaire might have 100 assigned to "poor judgment" and 90 assigned to "personal conflict." This would indicate that the relief took place because the commander had exercised poor judgment and, to a somewhat lesser degree, because he had also been involved in

a personal conflict with his seniors. Since Figure 1 would show this relief as just "poor judgment," I did not believe this figure alone would give a valid graphic portrayal of the reasons for relief.

Figure 3 illustrates the total numbers assigned to all categories in the fifty-nine reliefs. The reasons for relief, by percentage of each category, were computed. The following comparison is between figures 1 and 3:

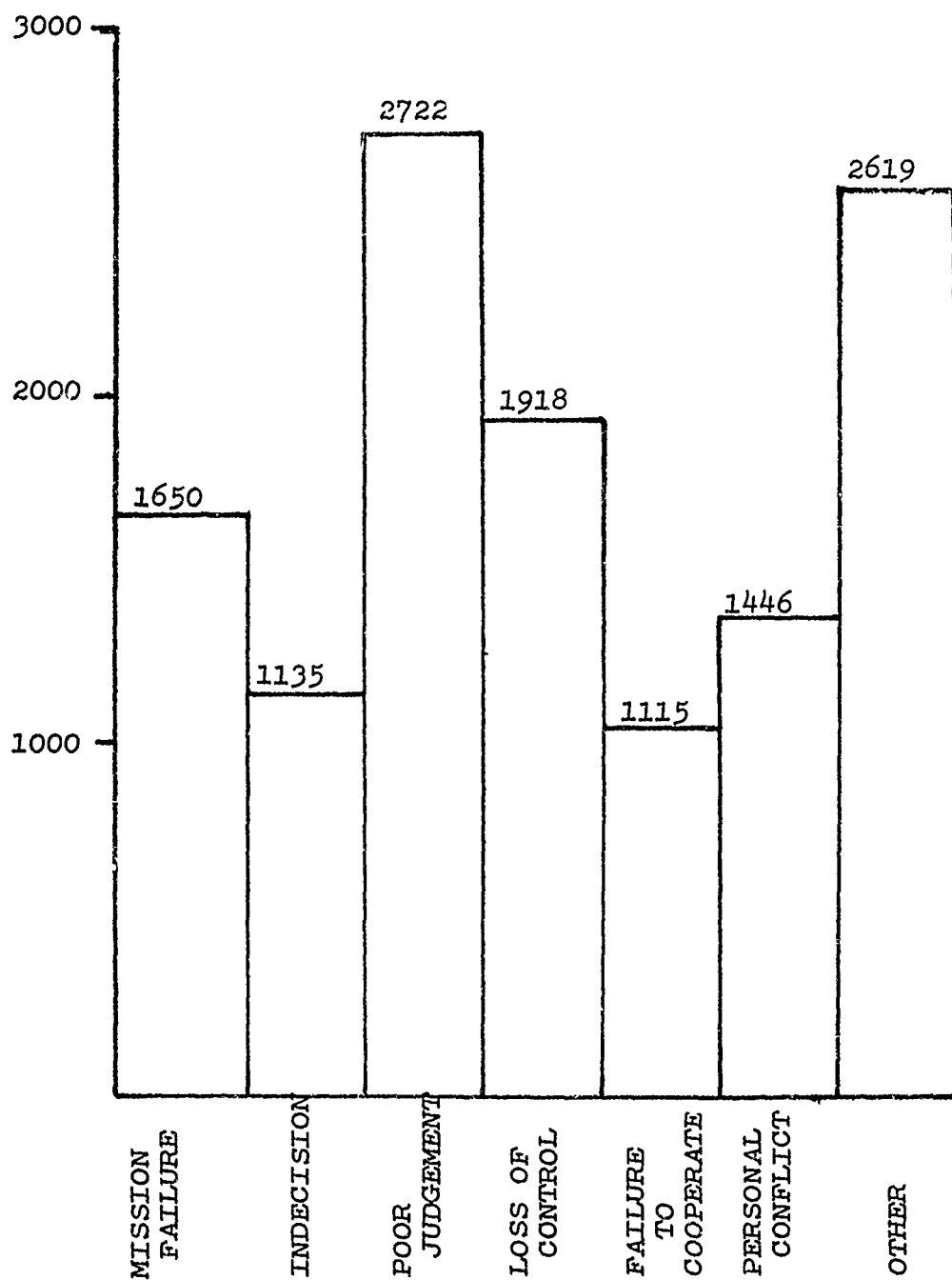
<u>Reason for Relief</u>	<u>Figure 1 Percentage</u>	<u>Figure 3 Percentage</u>
Mission Failure	18.6	13.1
Indecision	8.4	9
Poor Judgment	23.7	21.6
Loss of Control	1.8	15.2
Failure to Cooperate	1.8	8.8
Personal Conflict	13.5	11.5
Other	32.2	20.8

These differences between the most significant reasons for relief and the composite reasons point out the fact that most reliefs were not for just one reason. There were usually a combination of factors which caused the downfall of the commanders in these incidents.

The fact that forty-two of the fifty-nine commanders were relieved for more than one of the reasons (categories) on the questionnaire complicated the answer to the question "Why were they relieved?". The specifics of each relief had still not been discovered.

FIGURE 3

TOTAL NUMBERS ASSIGNED TO EACH CATEGORY



In order to determine the specific reason for each relief it was necessary to examine each incident in detail but without the constraints of the questionnaire categories. To say that a commander was relieved because he exercised "poor judgment" (and/or some other shortcoming) was not sufficient. To determine what constituted his "poor judgment" and other shortcomings would answer the question "Why was he relieved?"

#### SUBCATEGORIES OF RELIEFS

Realizing that reliefs cannot be clearly examined by broad category, but must be investigated individually, the cases were analyzed, and the reasons for relief were placed in new subcategories. Figure 4 depicts these new subcategories.

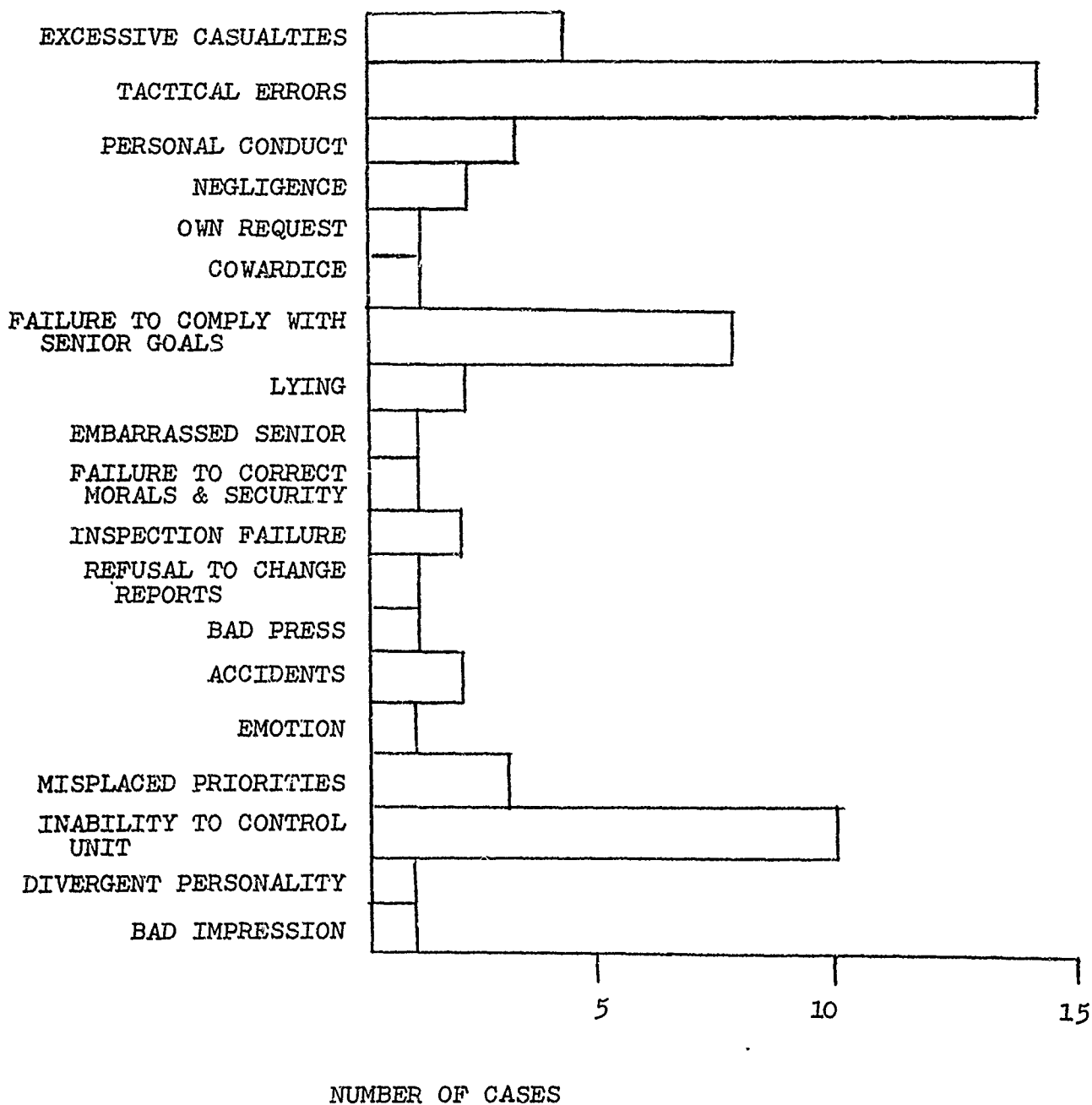
The subcategories of "excessive casualties, tactical errors, personal conduct, inspection failure, accidents, divergent personality," and "poor impression" have been explained earlier. The subcategories of "negligence, own request, cowardice," and "lying" are self-explanatory.

The subcategory "failure to pursue senior's goals" applies to those cases in which the junior commander purposely or unknowingly pursued goals different from his senior's. A cautious junior, concerned about friendly casualties and not producing a desired "body count" for an aggressive senior would be an example of this relief.

"Embarrassed senior" was an isolated case in which a junior reported he was bringing to the senior commander's

FIGURE 4

## SUBCATEGORIES OF RELIEFS





location a "Viet Cong KIA." The senior commander assembled the Public Affairs Officer from the next higher headquarters and all of his other junior commanders to view the body. The junior commander drove to the location and threw a dead jungle chicken at the feet of his senior.

"Failure to correct security deficiencies" was a case in which a company commander learned that his men were bringing Vietnamese women into their positions by means of a water trailer. The commander did nothing about this problem and was relieved.

"Refusal to change reports" was the final incident in a series of disputes between an artillery battalion commander and the division artillery commander. The battalion commander had refused to reconvene a court-martial on one of his men. When he refused to change a readiness report in compliance with the order of the division artillery commander he was relieved.

"Bad press, emotion," and "misplaced priorities" are described in the appended case studies.

At this point it should be mentioned that in many examples of tactical errors, inability to control the unit and failure to comply with senior's goals, the relieved commander was a "twenty-four month captain." This refers to the temporary Army and Marine Corps policy of promoting an officer to the rank of captain who had only twenty-four months of commissioned service. Depending on the officer's source of commission this could mean that his total service was only

twenty-four months at the time of his promotion to captain. Part of this time was spent at a basic course, possibly airborne and/or ranger school, and at a troop unit other than in Vietnam or Korea. As a result, many captains were just not prepared to assume the command (company, battery, or troop) associated with their recently acquired rank. Not all their mistakes reflected a poor sense of tactics or an inability to command. But not all of their seniors could follow the advice of John Paul Jones in listing the qualifications of a naval officer;

He should not be blind to a single fault in any subordinate, though, at the same time, he should be quick and unfailing in distinguishing error from malice, thoughtlessness from incompetency, and well-meant shortcoming from heedless or stupid blunder.<sup>1</sup>

#### TRENDS

Certain trends in the reliefs of battalion commanders and below became evident from the findings. I use the term "trend" in that these new philosophies of relief were prevalent in the "Vietnam era" (1965-1973) but were absent in our previous conflicts of World War II and Korea. These trends, the bases of my conclusions in Chapter V, are as follows:

a. Of the fourteen cases of "tactical error," only one battalion commander was involved. The remaining thirteen reliefs involved only captains and lieutenants.

b. Of the fourteen cases of "tactical error," only one unit did not suffer friendly casualties.

c. "Personality conflict" to some degree was present in over 50 percent of the cases in which a commander was relieved for "poor judgment."

d. Forty-two of the fifty-nine cases cited more than one reason for the relief.

e. Seven of the ten cases of "inability to control unit" involved captains or below.

f. Six of the eight cases of "Failure to comply with senior's goals" involved captains or below.

g. Nearly 50 percent of the captains relieved had recently been promoted after twenty-four months of service.

h. The chain of command was bypassed in the relief process in over 50 percent of the cases cited. (For example, a division commander bypassing brigade and battalion level to relieve a company commander.)

i. In fifty-four of the reported cases of relief, a replacement was available. In those five cases in which a replacement was not standing by, the next-in-command was deemed capable of leading the unit until a replacement commander arrived.

j. In many cases, there was no counselling before the relief, even when there was a perceived weakness in a commander. Comments such as "We have no room for failure,"<sup>2</sup> and "Any battalion commander who requires counselling should be relieved, even if it's a matter of personality conflict,"<sup>3</sup> were rare but expressed a harsh view towards counselling or coaching by the senior.

k. The effect on the unit seemed to depend on two factors:

- (1) The leadership style of the commander.
- (2) The cause of his relief.

The first factor appears to be the more important consideration. If he was viewed by his command as a poor leader, then the effect was always positive, regardless of the incident. If he was considered by his command as a good leader or a popular one, then the cause of his relief had to be well justified to be acceptable to the other officers and to the NCO's. The effect on the enlisted men was rarely noticeable in cases of a good leader's relief.

1. My hypothesis, "Battalion commanders and below are relieved in combat because they failed to accomplish the mission," was disproved. This failure was present in only 18.6 percent of the cases (based upon "most significant reason," Figure 1) and 13.1 percent of the cases (based upon the "composite reasons," Figure 3).

Commanders were more likely to be relieved before their perceived shortcoming resulted in a mission failure. Using the general categories in the questionnaire and a medical analogy, the relief process appears to be as follows: A commander may have one or more "command diseases" (poor judgment, indecision, and so on) which are manifested in various symptoms (continued tactical blunders, hesitance to make a decision, and so on). The perceptive senior recognizes the symptoms, makes a diagnosis, and effects a cure (possibly

relief) before the disease causes death (mission failure), In essence, commanders are usually relieved when they fail to meet reasonable norms in the pursuit of an operational or tactical mission.

#### RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS WITH NON-STUDENTS

In order to examine more fully the question of "When should a commander be relieved?" I expanded my data base to include the interviews of active duty colonels and general officers, on active duty and retired.

The greatest variation in determining when a subordinate commander should be relieved existed between the general officers I interviewed. One extreme is the philosophy that "combat is no place to train a battalion commander."<sup>4</sup> At the other extreme is this statement of another general officer . . .

If a subordinate commander fails, it is as often as not the fault of the higher commander. If this is not the case, then the subordinate was not properly trained nor properly selected in the first place. All too often, officers are relieved simply because blame for the failure of a mission must be placed somewhere. This is a particularly true among general officers.<sup>5</sup>

Between these two extremes is another general officer's statement . . .

We all have good days and bad days. Since we don't automatically promote a commander because he has a good day, why should he be automatically relieved because he has a bad day?<sup>6</sup>

One general officer responded that failure of battalion commanders on the battlefield to use their staffs properly can

only bring on defeat and failure. "Too many commanders try to run the show by themselves and no man can do that in heavy combat."<sup>7</sup> This response was particularly interesting in the absence of "personal conflict" as a perceived factor. This same general had acquired a reputation of relieving commanders who disagreed with him. He did relieve his former aide-de-camp, an infantry company commander, under rather unusual circumstances. This example of a "summary relief" is included in the case studies.

A belief shared by one general officer and many colonels was that too many commanders fail to get out to their units and observe what is taking place. The failure to observe is aggravated by the unit's normal perception that since he doesn't want to see, he doesn't care. This general relieved two battalion commanders for failure to get out to their companies to observe them in action. One of them was so hesitant about leaving his Command Post that he sent a helicopter out each day to pick up his company commanders and return them to his location. He conducted whatever business he had with them and then returned them to the field. The general ordered him to get out to the field. When the battalion commander failed to comply within two weeks he was relieved. The other battalion commander simply did not know what was happening in his forward units or in his rear area. When the general prompted him to improve his fire base defenses and offered him whatever assets he required, the battalion commander requested twelve chain saws to clear the fields of fire. The

division Chief of Staff was directed to fill the request. When he checked this battalion's supply area, he found fourteen saws on hand.<sup>8</sup> In both of these cases, the commanders had been counselled, replacements were available, and the reliefs had a positive effect on the battalion.

Many of the interviews with the generals and colonels revealed a "general lack of leadership" as the cause of relief. Examples included over-concern for personal safety, over-concern for troop welfare, and inability to anticipate future situations. These examples and others point out the relieved commander's failure to establish priorities for himself or for his unit.

None of the general officers interviewed addressed the issue of personality conflict. However, one-half of the colonels believed that this was the primary reason or a significant reason in the reliefs they described. One of the colonels, having served on the staff of division and higher units, described the following scenario:

In many cases, the relieved commander would start out by having a personal conflict with senior officers, usually a result of a difference in policy or a lack of cooperation between the two. The senior officer would then wait for the junior commander or his unit to make a mistake and this would be the reason for the relief. Even if the mistake was beyond the control of the relieved commander, he would be relieved. It was just inevitable. The replacement was not always the best man for the job, but he was usually a "known quantity" and, therefore, a "team man." In this way, the senior commander could feel comfortable with his new junior commander.<sup>9</sup>

This requirement of confidence in a junior commander was emphasized by one general officer who said, "If you don't have confidence in a man, one of you has got to go."<sup>10</sup>

Confidence in one's immediate juniors does not necessarily extend to confidence in their ability to determine when one of their junior commanders should be relieved. I base this statement on the fact that nearly half of the reliefs reported by colonels and general officers were effected or directed by someone other than the replaced commander's immediate senior. Even General Westmoreland was involved in this bypassing of command channels when he relieved a brigade commander.<sup>11</sup> These actions were certainly within the authority of the relieving officers, but the intermediate commanders are placed in an uncomfortable position. If we assume that the relief was for cause, the next senior commander should have been aware of the cause and should have taken action on his own. His failure to do so, as evidenced by the relief directed by a commander one to three levels above him, would normally reflect adversely on him. The relief by a commander at a much higher level also had a tendency to establish "norms" for those commanders under him, especially those who had recently been bypassed in the relief process. One staff officer who was often used as the general's "sounding board" by brigade commanders illustrated this point.

If a brigade commander wanted to relieve a platoon leader or a company commander, he simply did it. However, when an incident occurred which reflected adversely on a platoon leader or company commander and the brigade commander didn't want to relieve him, I'd get a call. What the brigade commander wanted to know was how the division commander would view the non-relief of the junior officer concerned. If it appeared that it might disturb the general, the junior officer got the axe.<sup>12</sup>



The effect of luck was another area developed by a few of the colonels. Even General Patton recognized this factor when he told one of his regimental commanders that "If some stupid orders from higher headquarters caused us to be severely mauled, I would still be relieved, as a beaten commander was of no value to him (General Patton).<sup>13</sup> This factor is further illustrated in the case studies.

One specific cause for relief which was mentioned by every general with experience in World War II was exhaustion. This could be mental, physical, psychological or a combination. Various cases were cited in which the commander just wore out and had to be replaced in order to reenergize the unit. Of the reliefs in Vietnam and Korea, there was not one reported case of exhaustion. This could be attributed to two reasons: (1) There was not the same sustained fierce combat in Vietnam as existed in World War II; and (2) The policy of six months in command in Vietnam relieved whatever pressure might develop in an active, aggressive commander.

The six months command policy, described in Chapter II, was denounced by nearly every officer I questioned. It exacerbated the command turbulence already present in those units which saw commanders relieved for cause. More than one former company commander or staff officer served under five different battalion commanders within a one year tour. This policy was probably best denounced by one general officer who said, "It was no damn good and brought total disaster. This is a sign of no regard for the important part of America--the young men who were unselfishly serving their country."<sup>14</sup> The only

statement in favor of this policy was that although bad in the shortrun, it was a good idea in the longrun because it identified the good commanders.<sup>15</sup>

The following case studies depict the circumstances surrounding actual reliefs. Identified by subcategory of relief these cases illustrate why various commanders were relieved. If known, the availability of replacement and the effect on the unit is described. Each case study is followed by an analysis of its pertinent points.

## CASE STUDY #1

### TACTICAL ERROR

A lieutenant colonel assumed command of an artillery battalion in Vietnam. Less than one week later the battalion was firing in support of an infantry unit. One of his batteries, while firing a separate mission, fired in error causing casualties to the infantry unit. This battalion commander was summarily relieved and transferred out of the division. In his new division, he successfully commanded an artillery battalion and he successfully commanded an artillery group in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting to note that this is the only reported case of a battalion commander relieved for a tactical error.

It should be noted, however, that this battalion commander was in a division which had acquired a reputation for its frequent reliefs of battalion commanders. In an interview with the Assistant Division Commander of this division, I asked why so many battalion commanders were replaced. He replied that the division was responsible for setting the standard for the entire U.S. Army. The division policy, therefore, was to relieve battalion commanders rather than to train them; battalion commanders were expected to be trained before they assumed command and were expected to underwrite

the mistakes of their subordinate commanders.<sup>17</sup>

This case points out the differences in various division commander's perceptions of the "accountability level" for tactical errors. No one will deny that this battalion commander was responsible for all that his battalion did or failed to do. Yet, could he be expected, in less than one week, to train the battery commanders whose mistakes he was expected to underwrite? Every Army officer interviewed was familiar with the "standard" this division was setting and disagreed with it.

## CASE STUDY #2

### TACTICAL ERROR

An artillery captain had commanded a battery for five months in the United States and retained his command for eight months in Vietnam. On two occasions, his battery had fired in error but without inflicting friendly casualties. Both errors were, however, quite obvious. The first error resulted in a round landing on an airport and the second error brought rounds on a Vietnamese Division Command Post.

The second error caused his relief. There was a replacement available who corrected the gun errors. This commander had failed to supervise in the right areas. Due to his popularity and leadership style the relief had a negative effect on the battery.<sup>18</sup> This was the only reported case in which there were no friendly casualties associated with the tactical error.

This case points out the relief, before mission failure, can take place. It was not known by the narrator if counselling took place after the first error, but it can be logically assumed.

### CASE STUDY #3

#### PERSONAL CONDUCT

An aviation company in Vietnam was having problems in the form of engine failures in a new aircraft recently acquired. Some of the pilots in this company were refusing to fly the aircraft, and they were supported by the company and battalion commanders. This company was the only unit experiencing these problems in Vietnam. The problem had reached such proportions that the vice president of the company building the aircraft and the senior technical representative in Vietnam scheduled a visit to the company. Although the visit was well publicized, the aviation battalion commander and the company commander concerned with the problem had decided to go on R&R.

When the officials arrived at the company position, no one with sufficient experience or expertise was available to talk with them as the company executive officer and maintenance officer were also on R&R. The officials determined that the pilots were afraid for no reason and so reported to the general officer commanding aviation units in Vietnam. The general subsequently flew to the unit and relieved the battalion commander, company commander, company executive officer and the maintenance officer. The general had brought replacements with him. It did not solve the engine failure problem, but it did place responsible officers in the unit to help resolve the problem.<sup>19</sup>

## CASE STUDY #4

### PERSONAL CONDUCT

An infantry company commander in Vietnam placed himself in a compromising situation by gambling with the enlisted men in his company and by borrowing money from them with which to gamble. He also drank heavily, even before operations, and, on one occasion was late in starting an operation because of his drinking the previous night. Despite numerous counselling sessions by his battalion commander, he continued to compromise himself. He was relieved by the battalion commander and replaced by a battalion staff officer. The relief had a positive effect on the company since his conduct had adversely affected the morale and performance of his men.<sup>20</sup>

In both of these cases (#3 and #4) the effect of the current leadership on the unit was the main problem. In case study #3 there was no counselling, but the relieved officers evidenced such disregard for the problems confronting their commands that they chose to place their own needs over those of their men. In case study #4 the officer was counselled and given the opportunity to correct his deficiencies.

## CASE STUDY #5

### COWARDICE

During a battalion-size search and destroy mission, an infantry company was ambushed by a VC battalion at approximately 1000 hours. In the initial contact, the company commander and artillery forward observer were killed. The company first sergeant notified the company executive officer who was acting as platoon leader of the platoon with the company headquarters. The executive officer crawled into a B-52 shellhole and refused to command the company or the platoon. The other two platoon leaders were separated from the company command post and were unable to do anything beyond fighting with their own platoons. The first sergeant assumed command of the company through the entire action. During this engagement, the company suffered over seventy casualties. When the battalion's other two companies were able to link up, the division and brigade commanders arrived. The division commander relieved the company executive officer and took him back to the division headquarters. A captain was sent out from division to take over the company. Court-martial proceedings were instituted against the former executive officer, but he was not tried. The first sergeant was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions.<sup>21</sup> The effect of the relief on the company was minimal due to its reduced size and the ferocity of the contact.



## CASE STUDY #6

### EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

In the Korean DMZ, a new division commander was attempting to improve the cleanliness of unit areas. An infantry captain had just assumed command of a rifle company and was inspecting the motor pool. The division commander flew into the company area unannounced. There was no one from the company to meet the general, and the company area was not properly policed. One of the enlisted men in the company took the general down to the motor pool. When the general arrived, he immediately relieved the company commander. This resulted in a most intensified program of compound cleanliness in the division. After the incident, the general directed that the captain he relieved be given another company in a different brigade.<sup>22</sup>

This example of an emotional or summary relief points out the human tendency to spend one's rage on the nearest perpetrator. The relief set an example within the division. To the general's credit, he recognized the relief for what it was and ensured that the captain was given another chance,

## CASE STUDY #7

### BAD PRESS

An aviation battalion commander had been in command for two weeks when he was directed to provide a helicopter to a team from a major United States magazine. On the second day of this mission the reporters were to observe the battalion support a Vietnamese Army operation. On the way to the area of operation, the reporters' helicopter received automatic weapons fire from Vietnamese in a sampan. The helicopter crew members said they saw AK 47's and some boxes in the sampan. In accordance with the standing operating procedures, the crew returned fire, destroyed the sampan, and reported two VC killed. The reporters wired a release to their magazine that the crew had opened fire on innocent Vietnamese in a harmless sampan. When this release arrived through command channels, the group commander relieved the battalion commander and replaced him with the group executive officer. The relief had a negative effect on the personnel in the battalion who believed their commander was made a scapegoat for a false, inflammatory story.<sup>23</sup>

This case points out the effect of a "reaction relief" on the unit concerned. It might have been avoided if the incident had been investigated. This appears to be a situation in which the group commander used relief as the easy way out of a sensitive situation. However, since the battalion commander was relieved an outsider might assume that the reporters'

story was true and that the crew members were guilty of war crimes. An unfounded reporter's story is not sufficient evidence on which to relieve a commander.

## CASE STUDY #8

### TACTICAL ERROR

A company commander operating in the Delta of South Vietnam directed the transport boats to land his unit in the wrong location. The boat commander complied. The company commander was two and one-half kilometers away from the correct location. Shortly after the landing a minefield was encountered. Realizing his mistake, he attempted to move through the minefield to his correct location. In this movement, his unit suffered two KIA's and four WIA's from the mines. He was late in getting into position, and was replaced by a senior captain. No counselling had taken place before the relief, because he had not exhibited poor judgment previously. However, he had assumed command of the company just three weeks before the operation. The relief had a positive effect on the company in that the other officers and enlisted men knew that he had erred seriously.<sup>24</sup>

In this situation the company commander's error, particularly so soon after assuming command, caused his unit to lose confidence in him. Since a replacement was available the relief was in the best interests of the company.

## CASE STUDY #9

### TACTICAL ERROR

A company on an independent operation in South Vietnam established its night defensive perimeter. The company commander established each position and followed the correct tactical procedures, but failed to realize that he had maneuvered his company beyond the range of the artillery supporting his troops. That night his company was attacked by an estimated VC battalion. His unit suffered seventeen KIA's and seventy WIA's. He was replaced the following morning. Again, no previous counselling had been warranted and the relief had a positive effect on the company.<sup>25</sup>

This is similar to case study #8. The company commander's error resulted in needless casualties, and his men knew it. A replacement was available, someone whose tactical judgment was untested but at least assumed by the company to be better.

## CASE STUDY #10

### TACTICAL ERROR

A company commander in South Vietnam was on his first operation within ten days of his assuming command of a highly regarded company. He established his defensive perimeter and then became deeply engaged in plotting and registering the artillery defensive fires. He relied on his platoon leaders and first sergeant to put in the individual positions. They did so in accordance with the previous commander's guidance. There had been little contact in this area for six months, and the security measures taken by this company had progressively weakened. No listening posts, trip flares or claymores were posted, and the machineguns were placed in easily identifiable positions. The company was hit later that night by a VC unit of undetermined size. Despite the artillery support the company suffered twelve KIA's and twenty-two WIA's. The company commander was replaced by an officer from within the battalion. The relief had a negative effect on the company. The platoon leaders sought a meeting with the battalion commander and stated that the fault was theirs and not the relieved company commander's. The enlisted men shared this sense of responsibility for the errors inherited by the new commander. The battalion commander, who had often praised the company and its previous commander, refused to reinstate the captain he had just relieved.<sup>26</sup>

This case points out the company commander's tactical error and the battalion commander's failure to know his unit's strengths and weaknesses. Both commander's failed to supervise. The battalion commander, faced with a test of moral courage, could have acknowledged his own failure in this situation and retained or reinstated the company commander. Instead, he chose to solve the company's problem by replacing the captain. As always, neither decision would have had any effect on those who were killed and wounded. The relieved captain learned an expensive lesson, but he had no further opportunity to apply it.

## CASE STUDY #11

### INABILITY TO CONTROL UNIT

A supply and services battalion commander in South Vietnam was faced with the problem of receiving, storing, and distributing a large quantity of material. His battalion suffered from crowded living conditions and problems involving drugs and alcohol. His situation was aggravated by an influx of low I.Q. replacements from the Project One-Hundred-Thousand program. Despite these problems he was able to accomplish his mission through the efforts of a most capable operations officer. However, the battalion commander concentrated his efforts on operations and allowed the morale and discipline to deteriorate. These problems were reflected in the court-martial and investigative statistics which compared unfavorably with comparable-sized units located in more corruption-prone areas of South Vietnam. The problem reached crisis proportions when a Vietnamese national under investigation for black market activities was killed by one of his sentries who was also under investigation. This incident was followed by a fire, determined to be the result of arson, within the battalion area. He was relieved and replaced by a commander who attacked the above problems. The relief had a positive effect on the battalion.<sup>27</sup>

This commander's failure was due to his inability to take charge of his unit and solve his command's problems. He



appears to have been so mission oriented that he neglected his other command responsibilities. It would seem that a combat service support organization would be particularly susceptible to problems which would affect morale and discipline. This commander failed to perceive this and lost control of his battalion.

## CASE STUDY #12

### INABILITY TO CONTROL UNIT

A battery commander in South Vietnam had been in command for three months. His method of supervision was to perform the jobs of various enlisted men within the battery. Unfortunately, his proficiency was not as high as theirs, and this caused frustration for himself and his men. His outlet for frustration was challenging various men to fight. The battalion commander learned of this problem through insinuations that the battery commander would get "fragged," that is, a fragmentation grenade thrown at him at an unsuspecting moment. Counselling sessions were conducted by the battalion commander but without effect on the battery commander. The battalion commander finally conducted a two week investigation of the situation and relieved the battery commander. The relief had a positive effect on the battery. A replacement was available.<sup>28</sup>

In this case the battalion commander attempted to correct the battery commander through counselling. The battery commander did not respond and was continuing to lose control. The battalion commander had no choice but to replace him.

## CASE STUDY #13

### INABILITY TO CONTROL UNIT

A battalion commander with two previous tours in Vietnam and with an excellent reputation within the division was engaged in the Cambodian incursion. When his forces became heavily engaged he exhibited the exact opposite reaction expected of him. Unable to decide what fire support to use, whether to commit his reserve, or how to maneuver any of his units, he simply froze. It was not a case of cowardice as he had proven himself many times before. He just could not make a decision. As a result, the situation became worse and he became even more indecisive. He was replaced by the previous battalion commander who was still in the division. There had been no previous problem of this nature and, therefore, no previous counselling. The relief had a positive effect on the battalion. The officers and enlisted men knew that his departure was in the best interests of the battalion.<sup>29</sup>

This commander lost control when he could no longer make decisions. Stress situations sometimes result in unforeseen reactions. There is no pre-combat test which can be given to prospective combat commanders to evaluate their reactions. It must be accepted that some will not be able to make decisions when the need for decisions is critical. This relief was required regardless of the replacement availability.

## CASE STUDY #14

### SUMMARY RELIEF

A Marine rifle company was detached from its parent battalion, flown to a new regimental and battalion area, and attached at night to a different battalion. The company commander was ordered to "drop packs" and move immediately to occupy defensive positions prepared by one of the organic companies of the new battalion.

The next morning, the Marine Amphibious Force Commanding General flew in with the regimental and battalion commanders. He admonished the company commander (the general's former aide-de-camp) for the poor positions his company was occupying and for the fact that his men were not shaved. The company commander remained silent about the orders to occupy the positions received the previous night from the battalion commander and the orders to drop packs, which contained the men's shaving gear, at the battalion command post. Both the regimental and battalion commanders remained silent. The general relieved the company commander on the spot and flew away with the battalion commander (who was later relieved for cause) and the regimental commander.<sup>30</sup>

This relief illustrates the general's violation of the chain of command, failure to determine the facts of the situation, and lack of concern for the unit. It might be

countered that the general had no time to investigate the entire matter--he saw a problem and corrected it. I submit that any commander who doesn't have the time to consider the facts doesn't have time to relieve.

These violations were aggravated by the lack of moral courage on the part of the regimental and battalion commanders. Their inexcusable silence kept them in command. The captain's silence, exhibiting loyalty to his seniors, was rewarded by relief from his command.

## CASE STUDY #15

### FAILURE TO COMPLY WITH SENIOR'S GOALS

An engineer company commander who had recently replaced a relieved commander encountered difficulties with one of his platoon leaders. The previous company commander was a first lieutenant who exercised no control over his fellow lieutenants and allowed them to do as they pleased. The new company commander was attempting to mold the unit as a team and to lead it properly. All but one of the platoon leaders responded to this philosophy. The dissenter would not become a member of the team and was relieved within two weeks. There was limited counselling by the new company commander. The effect on the platoon was positive. The relieved platoon commander was exchanged for another lieutenant from a different battalion who had also been relieved. Both officers performed well in their new units.<sup>31</sup>

In this case the company commander believed that there was insufficient time to provide further counselling and to wait for the desired change. The unit was being affected by this platoon leader's attitude. The company commander also knew that the longer he retained this lieutenant the longer he was establishing minimum norms for the other lieutenants. Since the previous company commander had been unable to control the company this captain knew that he had to act quickly.

## CASE STUDY #16

### MISPLACED PRIORITIES

During the Cambodian incursion, an engineer battalion was one of the first of such units to be placed in support of the divisions. After a few days into the operation, it became apparent that more engineer support would be required, and additional units were provided. The first committed battalion commander was relieved because it took too long for him to respond to the situation. In essence, he was directed to "piece meal" his efforts ("Send a squad here, a platoon there") and was not really given a mission. As a result, his unit became totally ineffective and became more of a labor unit than an engineer unit. This tasking came through the engineer chain of command and from the units he was supporting. This commander continued to accept the fragmenting of his unit because he failed to consider the limit of his own resources. He failed to establish or request his senior to establish the required priorities. He simply continued to say "yes" when he should have said "no" early in the operation. He was relieved by the engineer brigade commander, not by his immediate senior--the group commander. There was a replacement available, but the relief did not have a beneficial effect on the unit.<sup>32</sup>

The tendency to appear as a "can do" commander has its dangers. This commander should have explained the

situation to his senior when he still had control over it. No unit can remain effective if every task is assigned "top priority." Assigning a mission requires the assignment of priorities.



## CASE STUDY #17

### BAD LUCK

Prior to the Cambodian incursion, the three companies of a tank battalion were spread through South Vietnam from the DMZ to III Corps. One of the companies was supporting a U.S. division and some allied forces at such a distance from the headquarters that proper maintenance was not possible. This fact was reported by the battalion commander to his seniors. When the order to move into Cambodia was given, the battalion commander pulled his companies back to his headquarters, repaired the vehicles as best he could within the time available, and set out with his battalion on a road march to Cambodia. Many of the tanks in the previously mentioned company broke down on the road. Unfortunately, the commanders of the field force, division, and brigade were armor officers, and this operation with tanks was viewed as a potential demonstration of branch prowess. The chief of staff thought that the disabled tanks were from the company which had been located with the battalion headquarters and which had access to proper maintenance facilities. He reported this misconception to the assistant division commander (also an armor officer) who recommended the battalion commander's relief to the division commander. By the time the chief of staff realized his error, the battalion commander had been relieved by the division commander and was on an airplane back to the

United States. There had been no counselling, and the relief had a traumatic effect on the battalion due to the commander's leadership and popularity. A replacement was readily available.<sup>33-34</sup>

This incident was related by two officers, both involved with the relief, who were from different organizations on post. They had identical stories.

The above case is another example in which the facts were not known, and the desire to "solve the problem" resulted in another unwarranted relief.

## CHAPTER IV

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Paul Jones, "Qualifications of a Naval Officer," Naval Customs, Traditions, and Usage (Annapolis, Md.: U.S. Naval Institute, 1934), pp. 321-322.

<sup>2</sup>Student Interview #8.

<sup>3</sup>Colonel Interview #9.

<sup>4</sup>General Officer Interview, #4.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., #6.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., #3.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., #7.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., #1.

<sup>9</sup>Colonel Interview, #7.

<sup>10</sup>General Officer Interview, #8.

<sup>11</sup>General William C. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1976), p. 275.

<sup>12</sup>Colonel Interview, #7.

<sup>13</sup>General James H. Polk, "Patton: 'You Might as Well Die a Hero,'" Army, December 1975, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup>General Officer Interview, #4.

<sup>15</sup>Student Interview, #37.

<sup>16</sup>Student Interview, #34.

<sup>17</sup>General Officer Interview, #4.

<sup>18</sup>Student Interview, #28.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., #23.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., #24.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., #4.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., #16.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., #27.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., #37.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., #17.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., #19.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., #36.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., #18.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., #10.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., #2.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., #35.

<sup>32</sup>Colonel Interview, #16.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., #5.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., #14.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS, OBSERVATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

#### SUMMARY

Chapter II briefly traced the evolution of command and control, focusing on the importance of intermediate commanders. The quantity of published material dealing with the training and testing of commanders was contrasted with the scarcity of material concerning their relief. The decision to relieve appears to be based solely on a senior's personal judgment without benefit of guidelines or principles.

In order to establish these guidelines for commanders, it appeared necessary to examine actual cases. The problem associated with acquiring this highly personal data was described. The method of acquiring a data base, the questionnaire, and the group sampled were introduced in this chapter.

My tentative hypothesis was: Battalion commanders and below are relieved in combat because they failed to accomplish the mission. I intended to find out why the commanders in my data base were relieved and what effect the relief had on the unit.

My assumptions, terminology, and focus were described in detail.

Chapter III listed my source of information, Division "A" of the Command and General Staff College Class of 1975-1976, and the means of acquiring the necessary data. The questionnaire was explained in detail, and the rationale for the categories listed was stated. The selection of specific class sections was described along with the means of determining interviewees.

This chapter also listed the two pilot studies in this general area, their methods and their findings.

Chapter IV listed the numbers of questionnaires distributed and returned. It set out the reason for focusing on three specific sections and the method of acquiring information on fifty-nine reliefs.

The results of the questionnaire, verified by interview, were tabulated by "cause of relief." The category of "other" was examined in detail.

The total numbers assigned were tabulated and displayed a contrast with the projection of the most significant reason. This provided the basis for determining that:

- a. Reliefs were usually for more than one reason.
- b. The categories used were too vague to be of value in this study.

Each relief was then analyzed in detail to determine the specific reason and attendant factors. This analysis was displayed as an appropriate illustration.

As a result of these findings, my hypothesis was disproved. Commanders at the stated levels were not relieved

for simply failing to accomplish their missions. Mission failure was the direct or indirect cause of relief in fewer than twenty percent of the reported cases.

Case studies were used to illustrate various reasons for relief.

The reasons for relief were, in decreasing frequency: tactical errors, inability to control unit, refusal to comply with senior's goals, excessive friendly casualties, personal conduct, misplaced priorities, negligence, lying to seniors, inspection failure, accidents, own request, cowardice, embarrassing senior, failure to correct moral and security climate, refusal to change reports, bad press, emotional response of senior, divergent personality, and bad impression.

Interviews with general officers and colonels provided additional information in answering the question of when should a commander be relieved. Extremes in philosophy at the general officer level were noted along with the effect of personal conflict as perceived by colonels.

The frequent bypassing of the chain-of-command was noted, and its possible effect on a unit were described.

The effect of luck, the absence of reliefs for exhaustion, and the almost unanimous reaction toward the six months command policy were mentioned.

Replacements, counselling, and effect on the units concluded this chapter.

## CONCLUSIONS

a. Relief for "tactical error" was usually reserved for captains and lieutenants.

b. A commander was normally not relieved for a "tactical error" unless his unit suffered friendly casualties. The errors which did not result in friendly casualties were either not observed by senior officers or the errors were accepted as part of the junior officer's training.

c. In any relief for "poor judgment" there was a probability of the existence of some degree of personality conflict.

d. Commanders were usually relieved for more than one reason.

e. Commanders relieved for "inability to control unit" were more likely to be captains and lieutenants.

f. Captains and lieutenants were more prone to be relieved for "failure to comply with senior's goals."

g. Captains with only twenty-four months in service were more likely to be relieved than were the more senior captains.

h. The majority of the reliefs were effected by or directed by an officer two or more command levels above the relieved commander.

i. In most reliefs there was a replacement readily available.

j. Reliefs were usually effected without prior counselling.



k. The relief's effect on the unit was determined primarily by the units evaluation of the relieved commander's leadership and popularity. The loss of a good commander usually had an adverse effect regardless of the reason for his relief.

1. Failure to accomplish the mission is normally not the reason why commanders are relieved.

### OBSERVATIONS

When should a commander be relieved? This question was the driving force behind the study. Every moment devoted to this thesis was in response to the desire--no--the requirement that it be answered.

The person who must answer it should, however, ask himself some questions before he reaches a decision concerning relief of a junior commander.

a. Has he established the command guidelines for his junior commander and his staff? If he expected strict compliance with the staff manual appropriate to his service, has he preached and practiced it? Some junior commanders just don't know what channels to use in solving problems for their units. They are more confused when they see their seniors use a variety of methods to acquire support, materiel, or personnel.

b. Has he interpreted the mission for his unit and established priorities? At various stages in the Vietnam

conflict, there was an emphasis on aggressive, successful (i.e., high body count) operations. At other times, an emphasis on reducing friendly casualties was promoted. Has the senior acted like du Picq's general--

. . . who has given directions a thousand times on the battlefield, when asked for directions, gives this order, 'Go there, Colonel.' The Colonel, a man of good sense, says, 'Will you explain, sir? What point do you want me to guide on? How far should I extend? Is there anybody on my right? On my left?' The general replies, 'Advance on the enemy, sir. It seems to me that that ought to be enough. What does your hesitation mean?' 'But my dear general, what are your orders.'

c. Has he set a personal and professional example for his juniors? This leadership principle is not always present in a relief situation. Is the junior commander being considered for relief because he emulated his senior but was caught in the process?

d. Has he allowed the junior commander to command his unit? Has the senior forgotten that his inherent responsibility for the entire command includes allowing his junior commanders to be responsible? Has the "can-do with zero defects" attitude so influenced the senior that he will not allow the junior to make a mistake? Every senior desires junior commanders with good judgment, but how many have forgotten that good judgment comes from experience and experience comes from bad judgment?

Having answered these questions about himself and his own position in the command, the senior can analyze the situation by considering these questions:

a. Is this junior commander having an adverse effect on his own unit and/or the entire command in its ability to accomplish the mission? This must be the primary consideration in a combat environment. There is no room for personal animosity, evaluation of leadership style, or other factors which do not affect the mission accomplishment.

b. If appropriate, has the junior been counselled by the senior? This is obviously not appropriate if the junior's actions (cowardice, indecision, or other deadly traits) are manifested for the first time. In this area, I strongly disagree with those who state that combat is no place for counselling. Is not the commander's conversation along the "lessons learned" framework a form of counselling? Is not the senior's visit to one of his units and the subsequent critique a form of counselling? How can any commander or unit improve if no areas of improvement are discussed?

c. If counselling has taken place, is there time available for improvement? This must be considered along with questions d and e.

d. Is there a replacement available who will be a better commander? The future tense is used since a replacement will normally require some time to become acquainted with the situation.

e. If there is no replacement, will this unit and the entire command be better off without this junior commander? In essence, is the junior commander worse than having no commander at all.

f. Can the senior honestly state that the relief of the junior commander is in the best mission-accomplishment interests of his unit and the entire command and not an attempt to find a scapegoat for the senior's failure?

These questions become, with some amplification, the guidelines this study sought. A commander of a battalion or a lower unit should be relieved under combat situations when he is unable, physically, mentally, or morally to achieve reasonable norms in the accomplishment of a tactical or operational mission.

The determination of this inability and of the reasonable norms should be the perception of the commander, who, except under emergency or extremely unusual conditions, is the immediate senior of the commander relieved. He is also the individual who should effect, in person, the relief.

The relief must be accomplished with the unit and its ability to accomplish the mission as the most important consideration. The problem of the replacement must be considered before the decision to relieve. A unit poorly led may be better off than a unit with no leadership. This requires knowledge of the unit, its second in command and its potential value with no replacement. Few commanders at two or three levels above the unit have this knowledge.

The next conflict faced by the United States could well be the anticipated "come as you are" war in which we fight with only the resources on hand. Those resources, men

and materiel, will be limited. Mobilization of reserve components, increased production of supplies, readily available draftees or draft-induced volunteers--none of these resources will be present.

As in every conflict, our junior leaders will be inexperienced. As one general officer, a combat veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam stated, "It is a paradox that the most critical combat unit, the platoon, is led by the most inexperienced officer."<sup>2</sup> This lack of experience will result, as it always has, in mistakes.

The Vietnam-produced attitude of relieving those who made mistakes would prove a disaster in many cases. The scarcity of replacements will be aggravated by the fast-moving action on the battlefield which would hinder if not preclude flying in replacement commanders.

The bold imaginative leadership required in a conflict in which we could be outnumbered and outgunned will not exist in a relief-oriented command. Few commanders can exercise such leadership when they view their seniors as men who will tolerate no mistakes and who will "solve" problems by relief. Commanders must be able to operate in an environment of special trust and confidence. Bold, aggressive, imaginative leadership is nurtured by this atmosphere. Mediocrity and defeatism are nurtured by its alternative.

We must command and train commanders to operate in the special trust and confidence environment. The alternative

could well be unblemished personal records, but total defeat of our combat forces.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

a. That officers be exposed to the problems associated with reliefs as part of the leadership instruction at every level of service school.

b. That the leadership manuals for the Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force (FM 22-100 and AFR 50-31) include a discussion of causes and effects of relief and include cases in the situational studies which would give future commanders opportunities to evaluate relief as an option.

## CHAPTER V

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Colonel Ardant Du Picq, Battle Studies (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1946), p. 136.

<sup>2</sup>General Officer Interview, #4.

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